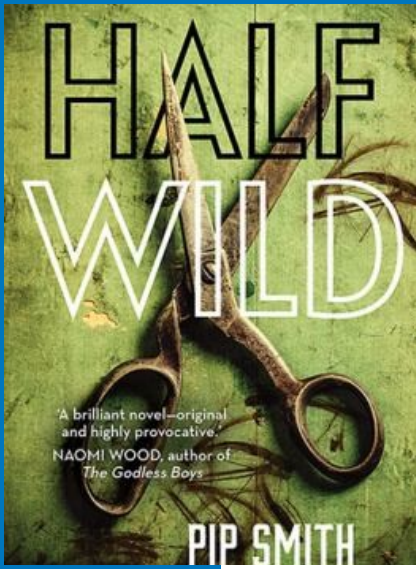


Half Wild



Author Background

Pip Smith

Born: Australia

Pip Smith is a writer of songs, poems and stories. She established the monthly writing event Penguin Plays Rough in 2008, for which she published and edited the multimedia anthology, *The Penguin Plays Rough Book of Short Stories*, in 2011. Smith was a co-director of the National Young Writers' Festival in 2012, and her first poetry collection, *Too Close for Comfort* (SUP), won the Helen Ann Bell Award in 2013. Smith was a Faber Academy Writing a Novel scholarship recipient in 2015, which led to her finding a literary agent and publisher. She received a Masters of Creative Writing from Sydney University prior to obtaining a Doctorate in Creative Arts from Western Sydney University. She is one quarter of garage-punk band Imperial Broads and works in a bookshop.

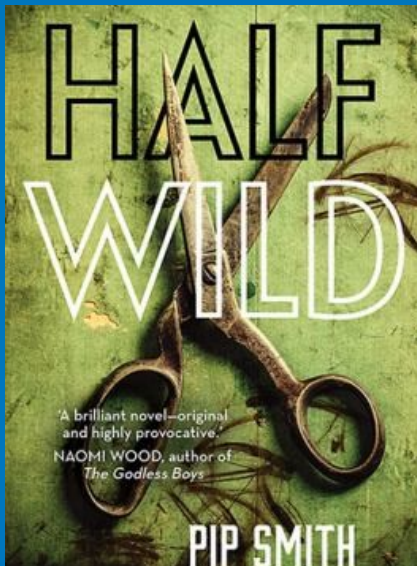
Smith's novel *Half Wild* was inspired when she saw a photograph of Eugenia Falleni/Harry Crawford in an exhibition of "mug shots" called *City of Shadows*, at the Justice and Police Museum in Sydney in 2013. She was intrigued by the sad looking man, and even more so when she saw that the photograph was entitled "Eugene Falleni—an Italian mother who passed as a man called Harry Crawford."² Smith says "*I was struck by how the portrait could be of two people in the same instant – both a man and a mother – and I was immediately interested in how someone might maintain two separate lives*".¹

In the story of the many identities of Eugenia/Harry, Smith recognised an extreme version of a universal experience: "*All the things that are expected of us in context: that constant tension between who we feel we are internally, and who we're constructed as being by the people around us*".²

Source: Allen and Unwin website; *Sydney Morning Herald*

¹⁺² Pip Smith quoted in Jane Sullivan, "Interview: Pip Smith, author of *Half Wild*", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 06/07/17

Half Wild



Book Summary

Sydney, 1938. After being hit by a car on Oxford Street, sixty-three-year-old Jean Ford lies in a coma in Sydney Hospital. Doctors talk across her body, nurses jab her in the arm with morphine, detectives arrive to take her fingerprints. She has £100 in her pocket, but no identification. Memories come back to her - a murder trial, a life in prison - but with each prick of the needle her memories begin to shift.

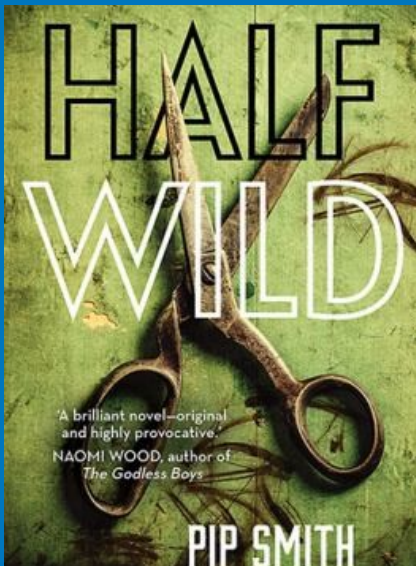
Wellington, 1885. Tally Ho doesn't need to go to school because she is going to be a fisherman or a cart driver or a butcher boy like Harry Crawford. Wellington is her town and she makes up the rules. Papa takes her fishing, Nonno teaches her how to jump fences on his horse Geronimo - life gallops on the way it should, until a brother, baby William, is born. 'Go and play with your sisters,' Papa says, but wearing dresses and sipping tea is not the life for Tally Ho. Taking the advice of her hero, Harry Crawford, she runs away.

Sydney, 1917. The burned body of a woman is discovered on the banks of the Lane Cove River. Was she a mad woman? A drunk who'd accidentally set herself on fire? Nobody knows, until-three years later - a tailor's apprentice tells police that his mother went missing that same weekend, and that his stepfather, Harry Crawford, is not who he seems to be. Who, then, is he?

Based on the true lives of Eugenia Falleni, *Half Wild* is Pip Smith's dazzling debut novel.

Source: Publisher (Allen and Unwin).

Half Wild

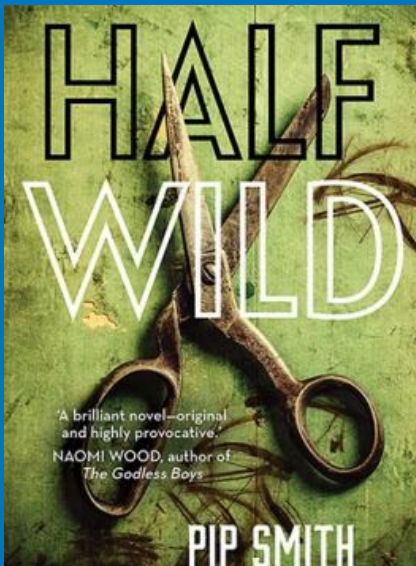


Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to construct a semi-fictional story about a real, once-breathing person, and what are the ethical responsibilities when that person's identity is different to ours?
2. How does the author's writing style in the first part of the book, when Eugenia/Harry is a girl, contrast with the later sections? Do the shifts in perspective and tone affect your emotional response to Eugenia/Harry?
3. The author weaves primary source documents from the period, as well as imagined ones, into the narrative. Do you think this is a successful technique?
4. How difficult do you think it would have been for a woman to identify and live as a man in the early twentieth century?
5. Do you think Eugenia/Harry had any hope of receiving a fair trial for the murder of Annie Birkett?

Continued overleaf

Half Wild



Discussion Questions (continued)

6. If you could have a conversation with any three of the characters in the novel, who would you choose, and what would you ask?
7. What do you think it would be like to live your life oscillating between the different roles others expect to see, or expect you to be?
8. *"It began with a photograph of a sad man with an unsettling gaze. His face was composed, but something in his eyes suggested that everything was falling apart."*³ Have you seen the police photo of Harry Crawford/Eugenia Falleni? What was your reaction to the photo? Do you think the author captured this character?
9. The book began life as a play, and is written by an actor and theatre worker, do you think this shows in the writing?

Just for fun

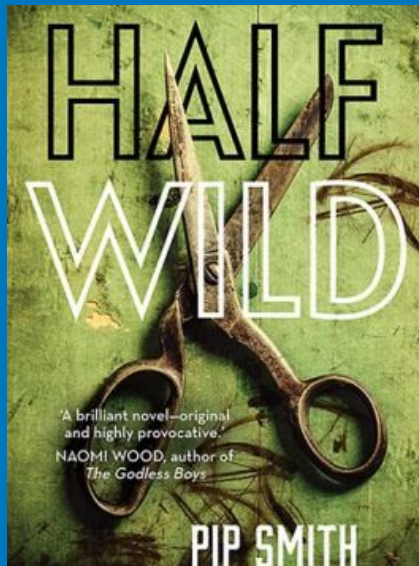
10. Have you read the non-fiction story of Eugenia's life in *Eugenia* by Mark Tedeschi or *Eugenia: a man* by Suzanne Falkiner? Do you have a preference for the fictionalised version or either of the non-fiction accounts? Why?

Source: Allen and Unwin website, *Kill your darlings* website

³ Pip Smith quoted in Jane Sullivan, "Interview: Pip Smith, author of *Half Wild*", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 06/07/17

Half Wild

Reviews



As the threads of Crawford's life unravel through these second-hand accounts, the mysteries of his life – primarily the death of Birkett – are dragged out into the open in a way that feels

unsettling. In some ways, this creates a more compelling story, thriving on the tension that slowly builds throughout, but in others, it feels like a somewhat callous treatment of a complex person. In serving the story, do we fail the character, and more specifically, the real life Crawford?

To address the elephant in the room – as a trans person, it can be a somewhat alienating experience to read the imagined Crawford portrayed throughout *Half Wild*.

Alison Gallagher, *Kill Your Darlings*

Half Wild is disorienting but deliberately so. Falleni starts as a fabulist with a healthy imagination and that aspect of her personality, her mercurial nature is the only constant. Smith shifts the narrative style to reflect Falleni's reinvention of herself which gives multiple views of the character but never anything firm to really grasp onto.

As the same time, Smith delivers a strong feeling of time and place – both Wellington in the 1880s and Sydney in the 1910s – both through her descriptions of those places and period detail but also through the speech and attitudes of her various narrators.

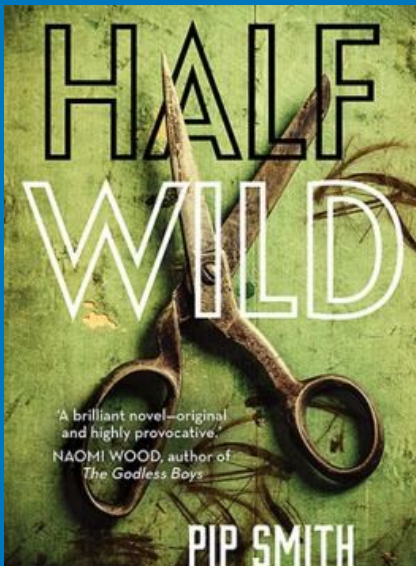
Half Wild is a brave experiment that for the most part comes off.

The story is always strongest when seeing the world through Falleni's point of view and starts to run out of puff a bit when it constantly shifts point of view through the third section. But overall this is a fascinating exploration of a fascinating character and an extremely strong and unique debut.

Robert Goodman, *Austcrime*

Continued overleaf

Half Wild



Reviews (continued)

Bringing in a large cast of characters with distinct voices who surround Falleni as she moves through childhood to adulthood, Smith has taken huge poetic licence; as she says herself in the book's author's note, "*Half Wild* is a work of fiction written through and around historical sources ...".

The structure resembles a mosaic of voices that colour-in the pieces of Falleni's life. This analysis makes sense when you realise that *Half Wild* started life as a play. It is easy then to imagine each of Smith's characters waiting off stage to give voice to the people who may have influenced Falleni's life. By the book's end, the voices coalesce. And what does become clear is Smith's sympathy for Falleni who seemed determined to take for herself in life that which was once considered the prerogative of men.

Dianne Dempsey, *Sydney Morning Herald*

'Pip Smith is a writer full to the brim with brio and vim. Her fiction leaves nothing behind: every sentence wrings language for its emotional and aesthetic possibilities. *Half Wild* is a remarkable work of empathy: Smith has committed herself entirely to the imaginative act, plonking us right down into the shoes, skin and mind of a person who shed these same things time and again. We live in an era where the reinvention of self is common, and even encouraged; *Half Wild* reveals to us in dynamic prose that these concerns are timeless and universal, that one of history's most exceptional chameleons could have been you, me or anyone we know.'

Sam Cooney, editor of *The Lifted Brow*